

## FROM THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH—FLAX

but the job of uprooting the flax was handed over to the boys and girls, as it was less hard on young backs. The flax was pulled out in small bundles, which would be gathered carefully and set aside; the children had been cautioned to handle them gingerly because of the seeds, which were highly valued, for when pressed they yielded the oil known as linseed. These small bundles, tied with straw, were set up in wigwam fashion to dry, and later were hauled, with the same care for the seeds, to the barn. There the flax was spread out on the threshing floor, the root ends weighted down with a heavy plank, and the seed heads batted with a heavy wooden tool, an operation which freed the pods of their precious contents. This hard dusty job was taken over by a man, for it took both strength and skill to handle the weighty, home-made "batter," as it was called.

Next the stems were straightened out, tied in bundles, and stored in a dry place. At this stage the flax would not deteriorate if the process of turning it into linen had to be interrupted; it could be stored without danger for several years. But if the work were to be carried on without a break, the tough outer straw covering, called "boon," had to be rendered brittle so that it could be separated from the inner filaments, which are the true flax. The major part of this process, called "retting," was turned over to the sun, the rain, and the dew, with occasionally a little help from man. The farm workers spread it out thinly on a dry part of the meadow and turned it from time to time with a long pole, so that all the elements could do a thorough job of rotting the "boon." When the boon separated freely from the flax, it was "done."

For the second time it was gathered up, tied in bundles, and hauled back to the barn, to go through the process called "breaking." This, the hardest part of flax-cleaning, again required a man's strength to operate the heavy wooden machine, called the "flax-break," whose function was to knock the fibres apart and remove the already loosened outside boon. To render the flax even more brittle and thus make removal of the boon easier, it was first heated on grates set over a slow-burning fire. Two women passed the flax bundles back and forth carefully, inch by inch, while the male operator clapped the wooden break down on the fibrous bundles. For many hours on sunny autumn days one heard the sound of the clapping of the flax breaks, and the smoke of the fires drifted across the fields.

For a third time the flax was gathered up, tied in bundles, and taken to a shed or stable, to go through the process called "swingling" or "scutching," an operation which could be delegated to children, for the job, though dirty, was not one that called for great strength. The purpose was to remove the last vestiges of flaxseed and fragments of boon. With a tool called a "swingle," a sharpened wooden knife with nicely rounded edges, the flax was carefully belabored on the beveled top of a firmly set upright block of wood.

Now it began to take on its characteristic gloss, appearing as a bundle of long, clean, hair-like fibres. It was next subjected to a process called "hatchelling," the object of which was to straighten out and separate the fibres into several grades. The "hatchel," the simple